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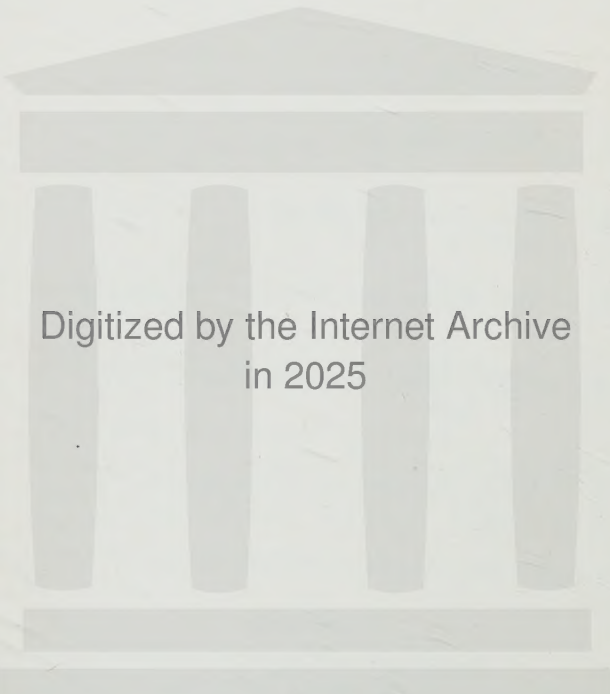
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*The Biblical quotations in this book are taken from the
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INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament is a very ancient book. Not only so; it took a very long time to write. Many of its great stories were told over and over again and written down at different times. Naturally each age added something of its own, according to its own understanding of the story. This is as true of Moses as it is of other great characters of the Old Testament. Much of what we know of him comes from the pen, not of those who lived at the same time as he, but of those who lived in later times. In the stories, as we now have them, we see the figure of this great man as it was reflected in the spirit and the faith of those later times.

This means that we have no full biography of Moses; still less have we any account of him written in terms of "strict historical science". But God's revelation of Himself to the people of Israel was inseparably connected with his name. This revelation was felt to have full authority for all later time, right up to the end of the Old Testament period. And so it came about that men of all these later times felt that they too were concerned in the history of Moses; the ancient traditions that spoke of him were carefully preserved, and passed on from one age to the next.

Now even a reader who does not read very carefully can observe that the figure of Moses and the office that he held are not depicted in exactly the same way in all the stories. There is nothing surprising in this. The pictures that later ages formed of Moses were naturally influenced by the spirit and the outlook of each age, and that means that they differ in detail from

one another. One period stresses one aspect of the person and message of Moses, another period a different aspect. One group finds the essential thing in the stern and even terrifying element in the work of Moses; on others we see the impression left by the suffering that lay below the surface of his life, and by his service as the mediator between God and His people. But, though these interpretations differ among themselves, each one has without doubt caught something that is true and valid in relation to Moses.

These later writers had in their minds questions and needs and answers to questions related to their own experiences, as they tried to follow Moses in the path of faith. The traditions about him were not laid up in archives all through the centuries; they were passed on as living traditions from mouth to mouth and from soul to soul. Now a picture handed on like this from generation to generation cannot remain unaltered. It is bound to be affected by the experiences of faith that the people of God have passed through in one period or another; in this way it may even come to be a more complete picture than it was, just because it has been enriched by the discoveries and experiences of later ages. Thus it comes about that what we find in the books of the Old Testament includes something of Israel's own picture of itself and of its history; in consequence Moses, as he is presented to us, rises to gigantic stature; he surpasses the limits of ordinary human capacity; he stands as a colossus high above all the sons of men. And yet, for all that, here is the true and genuine figure of a man, a figure that has power to move us by its very humanity.

But we have not yet come to the most important point of all. Not a single one of all these stories, in which Moses is the central figure, was really written about

Moses. Great as was the veneration of the writers for this man to whom God had been pleased to reveal Himself, in all these stories it is not Moses himself, Moses the man, but God who is the central figure. *God's* words and *God's* deeds, these are the things that the writers intend to set forth. We shall find that this principle applies to all the early narratives of Israel; they are stories of God's great acts of salvation, of His enduring patience, and also of His judgments and His vengeance; in no single case is a man—be he the very greatest among the sons of men—the central figure. The aim of all these stories is to render honour to God, to glorify His deeds, His patience, and the faithfulness that He has been pleased to reveal. In other words, all the stories about Moses bear testimony to God. In them men are not presented in any ideal fashion; on the contrary they are realistically shown in every aspect of their human nature. Thus we should not be surprised to find that human imperfection casts deep shadows even upon these men, who were the recipients of the revelation of the living God; and that truth demands that the failures of these great men should be unsparingly shown up. If we realize this, we are less likely to make the mistake of imagining that the men about whom these stories were written were the really important actors in them.

Since, then, Moses is not the principal actor in the Old Testament stories about him, we shall not make him the principal character in our book. First we shall sketch in broad outline the picture of Moses as that has been handed down to us by the various strands of the tradition; but this once done, we shall go on to consider the principal features in that revelation of God which is associated with his name.

CHAPTER ONE

MOSES THE MAN

Several times the one with whom we are here concerned is referred to just as "the man Moses" (Ex. 32 : 1, 23; Num. 12 : 3). A strangely simple way of speaking of one who, according to the tradition of later times, combined in his own person almost all imaginable dignities in Church and State alike. Was he not at the same time Priest and Leader and Prophet and Lawgiver and Captain of his people? Yet, alongside all those titles of honour that a grateful posterity bestowed upon him, this simple description also has its importance and its special significance. [Moses was a man, a human being. He was not a saint, an ascetic, one who had stripped himself of all ordinary human feelings; equally, he was not a hero in the sense in which that word was ordinarily understood in ancient times. Certainly he was in no way a demi-god. He is indeed presented as a figure of incomparable greatness. But the neat and exact precision with which the dividing line between him and God is always made clear is one of the most admirable features of these narratives. There was nothing divine about Moses. Therefore neither the men of his own time nor the men of later times ever offered to him such worship as is offered to God alone. He was "the man Moses".]

It sometimes almost looks as though the tradition deliberately goes out of its way to emphasize the human features in the picture of this great man. One trait

is specially characteristic of him. [From time to time a wild, fierce anger blazes up in him. Under such an impulse he slays the Egyptian who has been ill-treating one of his fellow-countrymen. This uncontrolled outbreak of passion does not serve as the spark that sets in motion the freeing of Israel from Egypt; it is just the violent action of a man who has not yet heard the call of God.] The only result of it is that Moses has to become an exile. But even later, even when he is the man whom God has invested with authority, this furious anger still bursts forth from time to time. When Moses comes down from the mountain and sees the abomination of the worship of the golden calf, in his anger he casts down the tables written with the finger of God and shatters them. He is unwilling to bring to a people so deeply sunk in idolatry the revelation of the commandments of God.

[On one occasion, (Num. 11 : 10 ff.), the way in which Moses speaks to God does not stop short of downright irreverence. He is at the end of his tether. The giant has broken down under the weight of his commission; he argues with God, he wishes to fling back in His face the task that He has laid upon him:]

‘Why hast thou dealt ill with thy servant . . . that thou dost lay the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I bring them forth, that thou shouldst say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries the sucking child . . .”? I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me. If thou wilt deal thus with me, kill me at once . . . that I may not see my wretchedness.’

And God has mercy on His servant in his despair. Seventy elders are to be brought out to the tent of meeting, in order that they may help Moses in his task of governing the people. But for this they need the gift of the Spirit of God; so God takes a part of the Spirit

that rests upon Moses, and distributes it among these seventy men. Then the unexpected happens; no sooner has the spirit of Moses come upon these men than they fall into a strange state of excitement and ecstasy, which seems as though it is going to have no end (Num. 11 : 24 ff.). So immense was the power of the Spirit as it rested upon Moses that even a small fragment of it was enough to drive other men completely out of the ordinary balance of their minds. Even the crumbs from Moses' inspiration were a weight too heavy for their mind and spirit to carry. Think then how wonderful Moses must have been! He was able calmly to bear the tremendous weight of the possession of the Spirit, and still to continue to live as a normal human being.

In the mirror of this story we can see clearly the reflection of what Moses really was. He was "the man Moses"—nothing more than that; but God had called him, revealed Himself to him, and in no ordinary measure had given to him the endowment of the Spirit. Thus he has become "the man of God". "Man of God"—this is his title (Deut. 33 : 1; Jos. 14 : 6), or even more clearly "Servant of the LORD" (Jos. 1 : 1). Servant of the Lord—the one who no longer belongs to himself. One who bears this title cannot act in independence, cannot speak his own words or walk in his own ways; it is another who has girded him. This was the way in which his people thought of him. Of course they knew that Moses was of their own flesh and blood; yet they never boasted of the fact that their race had produced so great a man as this. He was indeed of their own kindred; but it was God who had given him the gift of His holy Spirit, had enlightened him; it was as a result of this enlightenment, this giving of the Spirit, that Moses had once for all been drawn over to the

side of God, caught away from the sphere in which the rest of the people lived.

Should it surprise us that such a man as this could not be popular? With quite horrifying obstinacy the people counter the work and the service of Moses with murmurings, with hostility, even with open rejection.¹ At one moment, in their faint-heartedness, they completely lose confidence in him and desire to return to Egypt: "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" (Ex. 14 : 11; cf. Num. 14 : 3). At times, as in the story of Korah, they contest the unique character of the calling and office of Moses; they lay claim to equal rights with him, and to such immediate access to the presence of God as he enjoys (Num. 16). It is important to notice that, when his right to exercise this office is called in question, Moses does not speak on his own behalf; he leaves his vindication entirely to God (Num. 16 : 5). He is not concerned to maintain his own pre-eminence; he does not cling to the gift of the Spirit as though it were his own peculiar possession. When the seventy elders fell into that state of enthusiastic excitement, and Joshua urged Moses to forbid such behaviour, Moses simply said, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!" (Num. 11 : 29).

On the day of Pentecost the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to all the faithful. But in the time of Moses that was still a very far-off event, and so it was his fate to stand in unimaginable loneliness between God and the people. He was alone in his moments of success; he was alone, too, in those times in which men showed

¹ Ex. 5 : 20 f; 14 : 11 f; 16 : 2 f; 17 : 2 f; Num. 11 : 1-6; 12 : 1 f; 13 : 31; 14 : 1-4; 16 : 1-3; 20 : 1-5; 21 : 5.

him all too plainly that he was a weariness to them. In this respect Moses was in very truth a forerunner of the Christ.

So in the story of Sinai, in an unforgettable picture, we see him climbing the mountain, disappearing from the eyes of men, entering into the clouds, drawing ever nearer to the presence of God:

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai . . . Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. And Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights (Ex. 24 : 15-18).

And when he came down again to join the throng of men below, he had become a changed man, even to his outward appearance. All those long days and nights he had been exposed to the splendour of God—and now something of that brightness remained upon his face. That refraction, that reflection, of the light of God was so piercing that the Israelites could not endure it; they shrank back before him and fled. Only then did Moses realize that his face was bright with a supernatural splendour. He himself had been unaware of it; so deeply had he entered into God's world of light, so completely had he been withdrawn from the sinful world of men. Only when he had placed a veil before his face could ordinary men draw near to him (Ex. 34 : 29-35).

We may cite one other story as evidence of the loneliness of Moses. The tent of meeting was regularly erected outside the camp. This was the place where God was pleased to reveal Himself in speech; thus it was the holy and dangerous place in which the encounter between God and man took place. But this

was not an encounter for which any and every man was qualified. Moses, and Moses alone, was chosen to endure it, and then to pass on the message of God to the people. And so, when Moses prepared himself to enter again on that hard way and went out through the camp to the tent of meeting, every man came out and stood at the door of his tent. No one could accompany him, but all followed him with their eyes. And when he had gone out and reached the tent, and the cloud had descended upon it, all those in the camp fell down upon their faces and worshipped. And there God spoke with Moses—and the narrator records this as something entirely out of the ordinary—"as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33 : 7-11).

As the people of the old covenant continued to think deeply of Moses and his career, they became ever more aware of the hidden burden of suffering that was laid upon this man of God. How much, they thought, must such a man have suffered, standing as he did alone between God and man, and bearing such a weight of responsibility! In the book Deuteronomy we see Moses as it were standing between the people and the fiery wrath of God. Forty days and forty nights he lay in the presence of God, praying and fasting for the sin of the people; when he learned of the sin that they had committed in the matter of the golden calf, once again he prayed before God for forty days, and neither ate bread nor drank water. Here Moses is seen in the clearest light as the great intercessor; more even than that—he himself suffers on behalf of the people and for their sake¹.

This aspect of the service of Moses comes out most clearly in the interpretation that is given in Deuteronomy of his death. Naturally, Moses would have wished

¹ Deut. 9 : 7-21, 25-29; 1 : 34-37; 4 : 20 ff.

to go over Jordan with his people, and to enter into the land of promise; he goes so far as to plead with God to grant him this grace:

‘O Lord God, thou hast only begun to show thy servant thy greatness and thy mighty hand . . . Let me go over, I pray, and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill country, and Lebanon.’

But God sternly cuts him short; here he must die, a death of expiation for the sins of the people:

‘But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not hearken to me; and the LORD said to me, “Let it suffice you; speak no more to me of this matter”’ (Deut. 3 : 23-26).

And so Moses died, lonely in his death as he had always been in his life (Deut. 34).

His death is shrouded in mystery, “His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated”. He, the shepherd and the leader of the people, is not allowed to set foot within the promised land; it is difficult to imagine a harder fate than this. And yet the story of the death of Moses does not end in lamentation or complaint. For God was with Moses in his death. He is given something far better than hope, for hope always has in it an element of uncertainty. With unveiled eyes and with undimmed spirit Moses sees the fulfilment of the promise. God showed him the whole land of Palestine. Towards the West, his glance swept over the whole land as far as the Great Sea; to the North he beheld the mountains of Galilee; before him lay Jericho, the city of Palm Trees, and to the left were the wide expanses of Judaea and the Southland, where the patriarchs had dwelt in their tents. The narrative tells us nothing of the thoughts and feelings of Moses in the closing moments of his life; everything that is merely personal falls into the

background in comparison with the fact that the whole fulfilment of the purposes of God is spread out before the eyes of the one who is about to die.

And then God Himself buried His servant. No one else was there, and therefore no one could give any information as to the place in which Moses was buried. Thus his people was spared a grievous temptation. It was impossible for them to pay any kind of divine honours to Moses at his grave. For, according to ancient ideas of the worship to be paid to heroes, the two necessary conditions were the solemn consecration of the grave, and the mysterious and continued presence of the spirit of the departed at it.

Let us look back once again on the picture that the people of Israel drew of Moses. This picture tends to throw ever more clearly into relief the features of the mediator, of the servant of God who suffers and dies for his people; and this is a very remarkable characteristic of it. The people of the old covenant, in setting forth this picture of Moses who suffered and offered expiation for the sins of his people, were thereby giving expression to a secret and inward hope. When we read these passages of Deuteronomy, is it not as though we hear the people of Israel say, "It was fitting" (even more strongly, "it was necessary") "that we should have such a high priest"? (Heb. 7 : 26), and that thus the story of Moses becomes a prophecy of that which could be fulfilled only in the coming of Jesus Christ?

CHAPTER TWO

THE CALL OF MOSES

There was nothing exceptional about Moses in the days before God called him. He had had a wonderful education in Egypt; but the writers of the Bible do not depict him as having been particularly pious; he had become a shepherd, just like any number of other shepherds; the only thing that distinguished him from them was that he had had to flee into the land of Midian, and so had become separated from his own people. Of course it is true that that ill-advised act of violence which laid the Egyptian low (Ex. 2 : 11 f.) was in strange fashion fitted into the providential purpose of God, since it was there in his refuge in the land of Midian that the call of God was to come to him.

One day, without any idea of what was to happen to him, Moses had led his flock to Mount Horeb, to the very spot which God had appointed as the place in which His great revelation would be made. There God revealed Himself to him in the flame of the burning bush. Many interpreters have thought that some mysterious truth is hinted at in the fact that God revealed Himself in a burning bush; but there is no need to think that this is so.¹ It is unlikely that the narrator had any idea of a hidden and mysterious truth concealed in

¹ Older interpreters took the flame, which enveloped the bush but did not consume it, to be a symbol of the divine holiness, which descends upon men but does not destroy them. It may be that we do not need to look further than the fact that the Hebrew word for bush (Sene) points in concealed fashion to Sinai, the name of the mountain at which the great revelation of God is to be given.

the event which he records. That was the way in which the story had come down from the earliest times. This was the way in which it had pleased God to make Himself manifest in visible form. Far more important from the point of view of our narrator is the very remarkable conversation that now ensues:

Then the LORD said, 'I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry . . . and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?' He said, 'But I will be with you' . . . Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM' (Ex. 3 : 7-14).

What did Moses mean by the question that he asked of God in the name of the people? What is in their minds, when they ask to know the Name of God? One thing is clear—they are not interested in the Name simply as a word; if they say that they want to know the Name, this means in fact that they want to know something of the nature and of the being of God. A God who has no name is, in point of fact, no better than an unknown God. Men of old time took it for granted that we are surrounded on all sides by super-human powers, the nature of which it is beyond our capacity fully to grasp. But who are these powers? That is the urgent question. Is man to think of them as unfriendly divinities that grudge him peace and prosperity? Or can he think of them as being well-disposed to him?

To find an answer to this question was at all times a matter of the highest interest; it is for this reason that Moses at once asks to be allowed to know the Name of the God who is revealing Himself to him. Man cannot pay personal reverence and worship to an unknown God. He can really worship only a God whom he knows, who has revealed Himself; and therefore he requires the knowledge of His Name.

But there is another and a different idea underlying this question about the Name. Man longs for the revelation of God, not only for God's sake, in order that God may be worshipped and adored, but in reality far more for his own sake than for God's. It is because he needs God that he desires to call upon Him. Just because he has such an intense need of God, he wants to get Him permanently into his own power. He wants to have a God who in a sense becomes part of himself; he wants to put God to work for him. In certain circumstances, so it was believed, he can get the divinity so completely under his own control that he can make arbitrary use of it—then we say that he is practising magic. In a word, the question of Moses about the Name of God is the expression at the same time of man's need for God and of man's impudence in relation to God.

And now—we wait in breathless suspense—what is God going to answer to this most urgent of all man's questions in the field of religion? "I will be that which I will be". The form of expression in Hebrew makes it plain that this mysterious phrase is intended to paraphrase and to explain the hidden name of God, JHVVH.¹ But is this really an explanation? Is it not rather an

¹ This sacred Name was in later times never pronounced by the Jews, and for this reason it is often thus written with the consonants only and without the vowels.

evasion than an answer? Yes, this is the first impression that is bound to be left upon our minds—God is withdrawing Himself from the importunity of men. He does not allow anyone to lay claim to Him, as men would so gladly do; He preserves His own freedom and the mystery of His being. But we have gone only half way towards expounding this utterance, if we see in it no more than God's refusal to answer the questions of men. The Hebrew word which we translated above "I will be" signifies rather "to be present", or even "to take place". Its reference, therefore, is rather to being in act, in activity, than to being at rest; and therefore we can say with certainty that the reference here is not to God "as He is in Himself", but to God "as He turns Himself towards men". This is, then, a word spoken by a God who condescends to men, who makes them aware of His willingness to help them. We might almost go so far as to translate it, "I will be for you that which I will be for you"; some have thought that it could better be rendered, "I will manifest myself to be that which I will manifest myself to be".

If God sends to men living in misery the message that He will show Himself active according to His own free decision, from the first moment the affirmation is a word of comfort, an assurance that God is "the One who is always there"; perhaps it is not too much to say that it is an assurance of the faithfulness of God. There are two points, then, to be noted: God condescends to men, He reveals Himself to men as the God who is there to help—the constant, active God. But at the same time He reveals that He is completely free in His own actions. He will always be the LORD; He never gives Himself up into the hands of men, and He will never put Himself at the service of their purposes.

Two stories in the Old Testament set out simply and

clearly this truth which perhaps is a little difficult for us to grasp. The first is in Judges 13. God had appeared to the wife of Manoah in the form of "the angel of the LORD", and had foretold the birth of a son, who was later to be called Samson. Clearly Manoah has no idea that it was God Himself who had appeared to his wife—he is simply convinced that some heavenly being or other has visited her; his only regret is that his wife had not shown herself a little cleverer, and so had failed to bring this divine being into such a relationship with herself as would make it possible to make use of him. So Manoah prays that the manifestation may be repeated. In answer to his prayer, the angel appears again to the woman alone. This time, however, Manoah, who has hurried up in breathless haste, succeeds in meeting the angel, and the following conversation takes place:

'Are you the man who spoke to this woman?' And he said, 'I am' . . . Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, 'Pray, let us detain you, and prepare a kid for you.'

"Pray, let us detain you." With touching simplicity Manoah gives expression to that eager desire that lies hidden in the heart of every man—to have God for his own, to hold Him as tight as possible. The angel is unwilling to accede to Manoah's importunity. But Manoah is far from giving up the struggle:

Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, 'What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honour you?'

Here once again we trace the hidden self-seeking, which decks itself out with a mask of piety. But God turns the question back on Manoah:

And the angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?' (Jud. 13 : 11-18).

Even then, Manoah is not prepared to give up his purpose; he hastens to provide a sacrifice. But the angel vanishes in the flame of the altar, and leaves Manoah half-dead with terror.

This brief narrative is extremely important. The narrator knows something of the tremendous strength of that human impulse that makes men, even genuinely religious men, want to get God under their own control. But he well knows also that this is idolatry. It is not thus that a man can draw near to the living God; if he tries to do so, he is doing violence to the holy freedom of God. Once again God reveals that His Name is a Name of inviolable freedom.

The second story, to be found in Genesis 32 : 22-32, tells us something rather different. Jacob is on his way home from exile to the land of his forefathers. He is hard pressed by the weight of guilt that he feels in relation to his brother Esau. Night has fallen. He has sent his family and his possessions over the brook Jabbok; "and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day". The story leaves us in no doubt that it is with the Lord God Himself that Jacob has to do, as he wrestles with this nightly visitant. And yet, grievous as was this conflict by night, and filled with terror as Jacob must have been, we find that the desire that springs up in his heart is exactly the same as that which was in the heart of Manoah. Half-dead as he is with strain and anxiety, Jacob can still say to God, "Tell me, I pray, your name".

This story makes plain to us that, whatever the depth of need into which a man may fall, nothing can reduce him to such humility that he is healed of this kind of

impudent desire to take hold of God for his own purposes. Once again God turns Jacob's question back upon him:

But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'

What a pair of stories! In each case, man's question is treated as unseemly, and no answer is given to it; and yet, "There he blessed him". On the one side God manifests the freedom that rejects every effort on the part of man to take possession of Him; and on the other He manifests His faithfulness: He is the same God who said to Moses, "I will be for you that which I will be for you".

We must not lose sight of the fact that the people of the old covenant did in fact learn a name for God, the holy Name JHVH, and that this Name was accepted by them as being in itself the guarantee of that revelation of deliverance which God had been pleased to give them. So this Name was very far from being just a name that a man can learn and then there is no more to it. No, this Name stood for and summed up the gift of the whole gracious will of God for His people. In consequence, the constant calling on the Name of God—as for instance in the Psalms—is anything but a meaningless liturgical flower of speech:

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake (Psalm 23 : 3).

This verse, if we expound it rightly, means something like this: "Of myself and from myself I could not venture on such reckless confidence. But God has revealed to His people, in His Name, His saving will; that means

that on behalf of men He has come forth from His hiddenness, from His unapproachable distance; and the Name which we know and on which we can call is the guarantee and assurance that this is so."

Thus we see that, in the faith of the Old Testament, the *Name* of God and *His saving will* are inseparably held together. One of the most beautiful of the stories about Moses makes this plain to us yet once more (Ex. 33 : 18-23). God is telling Moses that the time has come when the people must set forth from Sinai and make their way deep into the desert. Is Moses perhaps afflicted by anxiety about the dark way that lies before him? Suddenly from his very heart he utters a request of the most astonishing boldness: "Show me thy glory". God must refuse the request of His servant; Moses cannot see the face of God, for no man can see the face of God and live. Yet God is pleased to do something else for him:

And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name "The LORD"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy' (Ex. 33 : 19).

And then, after the Lord has thus passed by and has held His hand over Moses for his protection, Moses is allowed to see God from behind. When God comes down to man, man cannot watch Him, cannot look upon Him directly as He is at work; but to look on the wondrous works of God, after they have taken place—that is within the capacity of man. We can readily think of a parallel; when God set to work on the creation of the first woman, he caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man (Gen. 2 : 21). In the same way, when God came down to make His covenant with Abraham, He must first cause Abraham to sink into

deep sleep, into a dread and a great darkness (Gen. 15 : 12).

Israel was well aware of the distance that separates man from God. It knew that, if a man was allowed to look on the depths of the mysteries of God, he would simply be destroyed. It is for this reason that Moses cannot behold the glory of God. But, for all that, God does not withdraw Himself from His servant. What He does grant to him is the naming of His Name. Now the Name of God, as we have seen, means the side of God that is turned to man, the saving aspect of God; or, as this passage quite clearly puts it, it means that God is gracious to the one to whom He is gracious. What else is this but another way of saying "I will be to you that which I will be to you"—the word of the freedom and of the faithfulness of God? We may remember the answer that came to the apostle Paul in rather similar circumstances: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12 : 9).

We have studied a number of passages in the Old Testament in our attempt to understand all that is implied in this phrase "the Name of God". Now perhaps we are in a position to understand the immense importance of the command, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Ex. 20 : 7). The purpose of this command is to say "No", thoroughly and completely, to that desire that lies so deep in the heart of man, the desire to infringe the liberty of God; and that means here the liberty of the God who graciously condescends to men.

The particular way in which a man tries to get God into his power is not the important thing. In those early days men were sorely tempted to call in the magician, in order with his help to assure themselves that they had got the invisible under their control. The same thing has happened from time to time even in the

history of the Christian Church. This is perhaps the coarsest of the ways in which man can try to misuse God and the revelation of His grace. But, from the time of Moses on, among the people of the old covenant, to act or think in this way was regarded as a very grave infringement of the freedom of God: "Am I a God at hand, says the LORD, and not a God afar off?" (Jer. 23 : 23).

So the Name of God in the Old Testament brings us face to face with a strange and perplexing mystery. Men know that Name and utter it; and yet, in relation to it, they are like men standing on the edge of a precipice. Here is a Name. Implied in this Name is a revelation of God filled to the brim with grace and with God's freedom to forgive; and yet at the same time this revelation entices man, in the secret depths of his being, to try to lay violent hands upon it; it seems to stimulate that rebellious element that is present in every man. Is it surprising that in the end the problem was solved by taking this Name out of the mouths of men, and absolutely forbidding them ever to utter it?

But this was not in reality a solution. It only meant that the mystery was sealed up. Then came the time when the books of the Old Testament were collected, and were bound together by the iron clasp of the Canon; and so the inheritance and the harvest of the whole story of God's salvation, as it had been wrought in the days of the Old Testament, was shut away and sealed up in a book. And at its heart, like the soul and the secret of the meaning of the book, lay the mystery of the most holy Name of God. Who will break the seal, and reveal the mystery?

So our minds pass on to that moment at which, in the Synagogue at Nazareth, the roll of the ancient Scriptures was handed to Jesus. When He had read the

chosen passage the eyes of all were fastened on Him. "And he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' " (Luke 4 : 16-21). And so He taught the disciples to find everywhere in the Scriptures that which had been written concerning Him (Luke 24 : 27). "Search the scriptures . . . it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5 : 39). Of a truth, only He had the authority to open the Old Testament and to break the seals which had been placed upon it. Is it not in Him that the salvation of God, and also God's power to rule all things according to His will, have been revealed? Is it not true that in Jesus Christ God has revealed Himself as far exceeding everything that men have thought about Him, and everything that men have desired of Him?

Moreover, do we not see in the life of Jesus Christ exactly that which we have seen in the Old Testament to be true in relation to the Name of God—that men are tempted to take possession of Him for themselves? In Him too they have tried to infringe the freedom of the action of God—in the first place in that they tried to take possession of Him and to make Him a king (John 6 : 15); and in the second place in that they nailed Him to the Cross. So one who believes in Jesus cannot but see the deep connection, when we read the Bible as the record of God's saving activity, between Jesus Christ and the Name of God in the Old Testament. As we look back from the New Testament to the Old, we may be inclined to feel that the holy Name of God in the Old Testament is as it were temporarily taking the place of the Lord who is yet to come.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FIRST AND SECOND COMMANDMENTS

Scientific study has made it reasonably certain that, after the settlement of the twelve tribes in Canaan, the Ten Commandments had a place of special honour in the great autumn festival, which was known as the Feast of Tabernacles. In this festival the people of Israel entered each year upon a renewal of their relationship with God. As the high peak of the festival the Ten Commandments were ceremonially recited by the priest; and in this solemn act God asserted anew His claim upon the people; the Ten Commandments are the proclamation of His total sovereignty over them.

We must study the first commandment at considerable length, because it is the head and chief of all the commandments. We might even say that the almost countless laws and rules which follow do no more than expand and unfold this one commandment in one direction or another:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . You shall have no other gods before me (Ex. 20 : 2, 3).

If we are rightly to understand the meaning of the commandment, we must take seriously the addition, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt". The God who speaks here is the God of grace. From the point of view of ordinary history, the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt is an event of extraordinarily small importance. These half-nomadic tribes had gone down to Egypt, and had there been compelled to accept the

status of serfs. Now they have managed to acquire their freedom. But the pious folk of the Old Testament, up till the very latest time, regarded this outwardly unimportant event as the moment at which the people was brought into being as a people; here God's saving will has been revealed; here for the first time God has glorified Himself, that is, has made plain before the eyes of all His gracious sovereignty in the history of men.

That additional clause in the first commandment tells us that the God who speaks in this way is not just some god or other, He is the very God who has come down to free His own people. He has called them out of the house of bondage in order to lead them into that freedom which consists in obedience to Himself.

God has given His people freedom. But this freedom means before all else that Israel must separate itself from the worship of every other god. It has rightly been pointed out by scholars that Moses is here thinking not so much of the gods of the great Eastern religions—Marduk, Ishtar, Re, Osiris, and the rest. The first commandment is concerned in the first place with those powers close at hand—spirits of the dead or demons—to the power of which the men of old times attributed so many of the operations and events that influenced their daily lives. If we have recognized this, we shall understand in a new way how important this commandment is for us to-day. For the real dangers and temptations do not usually come to men from the gods of other religions. They come much more from those nameless powers and forces, which men are inclined to accept as exercising some control over the course of history, apart from the will of God, and to which they are therefore inclined to pay divine honours. Luther saw remarkably clearly that what the first commandment asks is the question of *confidence*—in whom do you

really trust? "One God means that One to whom we must look as the source of every good, and whom alone we must take as our refuge in every time of trouble". "I say, That on which your heart depends, on which it wholly relies, that really is your God". This confidence in God is broken when man has secret relations with other powers, and perhaps in his heart ascribes to them more effectiveness and more power to help than he does to the living God.

The faith of the Old Testament carried on this warfare with special bitterness in one direction—against belief in the spirits of the underworld, against demons and spirits of the dead, against soothsaying and necromancy, against every occult practice of this kind. Man is always exposed to the temptation to think of the spirits of the departed as having now in some way become divine beings, and then quite naturally to offer sacrifice to them, "the offerings of the dead", in order to bind them fast to himself and to assure himself of their favour. This temptation was as real to Israel as to any other people. But the religion of the Old Testament at all times condemned such practices as sinful. It had drawn the dividing line sharp and clear between God and every created thing. It maintained this line as sharp and clear after death as before it, and would not permit the distinction between God and man to be in any way obscured. For this reason it declared the dead and the grave to be unclean, i.e., incapable of being the place or the object of any kind of worship or sacrifice.¹

The prohibitions which are set out in Deuteronomy 18 : 9–12 are very comprehensive:

When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be

¹ Num. 19 : 14–16; 5 : 2; 9 : 10; Lev. 21 : 1.

found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practises divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD.

The confidence with which the clear line of division is here drawn is really amazing. As with a wave of the hand, magic, necromancy, soothsaying, in a word the whole wide and alluring world of the occult, is swept lock, stock and barrel out of the field of religion. The Old Testament does not, indeed, deny or question the existence of that darker side of the earthly realm. But it does reject quite firmly the idea that through the mediation of these powers man can enter into any kind of relationship with God, or read the riddle of His will. These powers, whatever they may be, belong to the order of the created and not of the Creator; it is not through their mediation that God draws near to men. God has been pleased to reveal Himself to men in another and more direct way—in the clear words of the prophet whom He has enlightened. It is there, and there alone, that we are to seek Him. And so we recognize once again that wonderful condescension of God to man, when the Lord speaks through the mouth of Moses as follows:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed (Deut. 18 : 15).

Earlier interpreters took these words as referring to the coming of one particular Prophet. But the words can also be taken in the sense that Israel will never be left without a prophet, that the dialogue in which God has engaged with His people is one which will never cease nor fail.

In Moses' great speech of farewell there is one phrase which in this connection demands our attention:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever (Deut. 29 : 29).

This phrase speaks, once again, of the hidden and unknown forces by which our life is surrounded; and once again it turns the eyes of men away from that dark side of the world, under the spell of which they are liable again and again to fall. But these words go far beyond what is expressed in the commandment to which we earlier referred. There are regions of the world that man cannot penetrate; there are mysteries that he cannot solve. But here faith, with incomparable confidence in God, leaves that whole realm of being in His hands. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God". The first thing that we are to learn from this phrase is certainly that man has no business inquisitively to look into these things and to attempt to master them. But the word goes further; this that is unseen and unknown is not meaningless or subject to arbitrary caprice; it too belongs to God and not to the devil.

How could we live even one single day without the consolation of this knowledge, if we think seriously of the sorrows and perplexities that pile themselves up round about us on every side? The secret things—these are not ours. But the revealed word of God and His commandments—these belong to us. They have been spoken to us by God Himself—to our ears and to our hearts, in order that these may become, in the fullest sense of the term, our own most personal possession.

In another passage of this farewell speech Moses is concerned to present the revelation of God to men as something which is really relevant to them, something

which is not intended ever to be the source of problems and difficulties:

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it (Deut. 30 : 11-14).

It would be a very grave error if we were to imagine that the word spoken to us by God is something distant or hidden from us. Any kind of ideal after which man strives, without being able to attain it, must be regarded as a command which summons him *from afar*. God's salvation and God's commands, on the contrary, are not something that man has to bring within his reach by his own efforts. We are not to imagine that man is to seek out the law of God; on the contrary, the law of God has come to seek out man, in the very place in which he is to be found. Man is always inclined to think that the word of God is too high for him, and that he must strain and make tremendous efforts in order to hear it—and yet all the time it is in reality very near to his mouth and to his heart.

It is time, however, to return to the first commandment, and the exclusive claim that it makes on behalf of one God and one only. What we call "exclusiveness" is a modern way of expressing what the Old Testament commonly calls "the zeal" or "the jealousy" of God. This is a feature of the Old Testament revelation which many people to-day reject with indignation. We are not in a position to parry their objection by suggesting that this phrase about the jealousy of God occurs only

occasionally in the Old Testament, and that it is therefore not to be regarded as an essential characteristic of the Old Testament belief in God. The exact contrary is the truth. In all periods, in all the traditions of the Old Testament on every level, this element in its faith plays a great, even a determining, part. For the Old Testament revelation points us to a God who is in no way a neutral power, something like a world-principle or a power of nature. On the contrary; God is here realized as in every respect Person and Will; in a word, He is an "I", who speaks to man as to a "Thou".

We spoke above of the "zeal" or the "jealousy" of God; and in fact in Hebrew hardly any distinction is made between these two terms. This may help us to understand what is really meant by the words. God is jealous—the prophet Hosea puts it boldly in the words that He is jealous, like a lover, like a bridegroom—that for man He should be the only God; He is jealous that He and He alone should possess the heart of man. He is, therefore, not inclined to share with any other power in the world His claim to man's love and honour and worship. In Deuteronomy 18 : 13 we find a command which puts the claim to exclusiveness in its most uncompromising form. The R.S.V. reads, "You shall be blameless before the LORD your God"; but the Hebrew, literally translated, means, "You shall be entirely (i.e. undivided) with the LORD your God".

When later on Israel came to write its own history, the only question asked about each of the kings is this: Was he entire, was he undivided, in the service of God? (1 Kings 8 : 61; 11 : 4; 15 : 3, 14). For it was the judgment of these historians that, in all the ebb and flow of history, Israel had first and last to do with God alone. The destruction of Israel—so we sum up their findings as they looked back on the whole course of

history—was not due in the last resort to any political power but to God Himself. Again and again Israel had tried to evade this decision to be the people of God and nothing else, had tried to turn aside to some easier way. But again and again in the course of its history men of God and prophets had stood before Israel in the way, and had challenged him to take his stand firmly on the side of God. As far back as the time of Joshua, we find Joshua presenting this challenge at the great assembly of the people at Shechem:

Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD (Jos. 24 : 14, 15).

Centuries later we find the prophet Elijah in a similar situation on Mount Carmel. We are not to imagine that the people had entirely deserted their own God. They still believed themselves to be loyal to Him, they still prayed to Him; but their heart was not “entirely” with Him, it was “divided”, since they wished also to maintain friendly relationships with the nature-god Baal. This they regarded as a quite satisfactory situation—a little belief in the God of heaven and at the same time a little belief in Nature. But now Elijah the prophet sets himself like a rock in opposition to the people:

‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him’ (1 Kings 18 : 21).

But the God “in whom man trusts and on whom he wholly relies” cannot be simply a power whose sphere is

that world which lies beyond the reach of our senses, the spiritual world. The great prophets of Israel, with the most penetrating clearness, recognized the true nature of all those earthly forces that men had turned into idols. They carried on a steady campaign against the policy of alliances, against armaments and cavalry; for all these were forms of insurance which Israel felt that it could use in order to evade its obligation of trusting in God and in God's help alone. For Isaiah, faith means to sit still and wait for the God who has risen up to help, and not to frustrate His action by confidence in what man can do for himself.¹ If only the people will place itself in the hands of God with complete confidence, wonderful things will happen. So on one occasion Isaiah rebukes the people of Jerusalem who, on the threat of an Assyrian invasion, had busied themselves with the fortifications of their city:

In that day you looked to the weapons of the house of the forest, and you saw that the breaches of the city of David were many, and you collected the waters of the lower pool, and you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall . . . But you did not look to him who did it, or have regard for him who planned it long ago (Isa. 22 : 8-11).

It would be impossible to put the question of trust in God more sharply than the prophet put it in making these demands of his people.

In the Old Testament the second commandment runs:

You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath (Ex. 20 : 4).

In earlier times it was held that this commandment was given to tell us something about the nature of God

¹ Isa. 7 : 4; 30 : 15.

Himself—that He is spiritual, and that therefore He cannot dwell in those idols that are made of material things. But in reality such an interpretation entirely misses the purpose for which the command was given. Its aim is not to make a speculative, philosophical declaration concerning the nature of God. It is concerned not with the being of God, but with the manner in which He reveals Himself. Many even among the heathen had rejected the idea that God can dwell in an idol, or can even in some way be regarded as identical with it. But all men are inclined to exercise an arbitrary choice as to what they are and what they are not prepared to accept as divine revelation. Now this, in the sense in which the Old Testament uses the word, is to make for ourselves an image of God, since by doing so man—we repeat, without really understanding what he is doing—has made himself the master and God the servant.

At all times man is equally exposed to the temptation in some way to draw God into the world which He has made, and so to set up some created thing as his god, as the object of his worship. In one case, a man sets up an idol made of some material substance, and under this image pays divine honour to one or other of the mysteries of the world in which he lives. Another man, intellectually better qualified, rejects the idea of representing the object of his worship by a sacred image that his eyes can see. But in reality the difference between the two may not be very great. Of course it is true that the whole creation bears witness to God and glorifies Him—

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork (Psalm 19 : 1).

But man is no longer able to hear this witness in the right way; he tends spontaneously to identify God with

the works of His hands; and so he is led astray into a material view of God, to the adoration of some created thing.

This is the great sin, which it is the purpose of the second commandment to exclude, and that in the most radical fashion that can be imagined. Moses is a man of his own time, and he still thinks, as the men of that time thought, of a universe constructed in three stories—heaven, earth, the waters of chaos under the earth. These three levels of the universe, the whole world of created things, are reviewed together, and it is declared that in them there is nothing, no creature and no form, that can represent God in a manner worthy of Him. In all these three levels of the world there is nothing whatever, whether it be original element or fully fashioned creature, that may be mistaken for an immediate manifestation of God and so set up as the object of human worship.

This principle is shown forth in the clearest fashion in the story of the golden calf (Ex. 32). Moses is up on the mountain tarrying in the presence of God. The people become impatient. So they turn to the man best qualified to deal with the situation, Aaron the priest, and besiege him with their requests:

‘Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’ (Ex. 32 : 1).

How very revealing this is! This is what the people are, when left to themselves even for a moment. Released only for a short time from the stern discipline of the word of God, they impatiently demand to be provided with an image of God. Man’s desire to be able to worship God in some visible earthly form is one of the deepest instincts of his nature. He cannot bear to live

in a world in which there is nothing for him to worship, in which there is not a single idol. We see further that man is quite willing to pay for his worship, that he is prepared to make real sacrifices to make it possible (v. 3). And quite naturally the people turn to the priest. What else is he there for but to satisfy this universal desire of men?

Does this mean, we may then ask, that the people of Israel have entirely fallen away from their own God? Can they claim that, after their sin as before it, they are worshipping the God "who brought us out of the land of Egypt"? (v. 4.) This is the point at which what is perhaps the most important thing in the whole story is made clear to us. Without doubt, Aaron and the whole people would passionately have denied that they had forsaken their own God. It was their firm intention to worship the same God as they had always worshipped, the God who had revealed Himself to them in His great saving acts. They certainly did not imagine that this God dwelt as it were physically in the golden calf that their hands had prepared. What then was the nature of their sin?

The calf, or perhaps rather the bull, was of great importance in the religions of the Near East. In it men worshipped what we would nowadays call the mystery of life, that inexhaustible power of fertility that keeps life going in both men and animals, and carries it forward victoriously beyond the death of the individual. But fertility is not itself the Creator; it is no more than a part of the creation.

There are many people to-day who would not wish to understand the word "God" in "such a narrow sense". Does God not reveal Himself in all the wonder and the mystery that surround us? But the Bible tells us that man, unless he hearkens to the word of the living God,

falls away helplessly to the worship of something created; that means that he worships God under the figure of some earthly power, which is not God, but belongs to the created world, of which God is thus no longer accepted as the Lord. We have said that these powers and mysteries, which man regards as the revelation of God, belong in fact to the *fallen* world. The story of the golden calf gives us a clear and unmistakable sign that this is so in the wantonness and unchastity which suddenly take possession of the people (v. 6, 17 ff., 25). A strange uproar and wild crying break in on the stillness of the mountain and reach the ears of Moses. It could not be otherwise; there is something dangerously uncontrolled and insubordinate in this kind of worship; for the powers to which man has here surrendered himself are the crude "daemonic" powers of the underworld.

In ministering to the people in their falling away into idolatry, the priest has brought a specially heavy burden of guilt upon himself. So Moses asks Aaron:

'What did this people do to you that you have brought a great sin upon them?'

He, the professionally religious man, should he not have been the first to oppose the people in their wrong desire? His defence of himself is naive—it sounds almost like a schoolboy speaking:

'Let not the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, "Make us gods, who shall go before us" . . . And I said to them, "Let any who have gold take it off"; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf' (vv. 22-24).

And yet this answer of Aaron is not wholly false. Looking back on it, he himself cannot understand how it all

happened that way; everything took place so quickly and unexpectedly—and there they all were absorbed in the worship of an idol!

But it is not always the people of God as a whole which is attacked by the temptation to worship God under the form of some earthly object. Public worship may be completely opposed to any such idea; and yet each individual may be all the time exposed to the attacks of that temptation. He may be taking part quite sincerely in the public worship of the congregation; and yet, for his own personal religious needs, he may have set up a private altar with his own private idol:

Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret (Deut. 27 : 15).

No doubt this was something that happened fairly often. A man was regularly taking part in the great public acts of worship of the congregation, but at the same time secretly in his own house was carrying on worship before some idol. This meant that, though he recognized his duty to the God whom all worshipped together in the open, he felt himself at the same time under obligation to some power of darkness, to which he believed himself to be indebted for some extra and private blessing. We must not suppose that this commandment has no meaning for Christians to-day and is therefore superfluous. Probably we are not tempted to-day to set up graven images or molten images in our own houses and to fall down before them in secret. To-day it is in our hearts that we set up our private altars. The kind of altar that we set up in our hearts may vary very much according to our race and background and class. But probably there are few Christians,

even to-day, who do not stand in need of this warning.

Let us now take a final look backwards at these two commandments and at what they teach. Only among a people which for a thousand years had been disciplined by these two commandments was it possible that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ should be accepted as a miracle wrought by God and by God alone. Only the apostles and evangelists of the early Church, behind whom lay the age-long discipline of these two commandments, could rightly understand and accept the divine authority to which Jesus laid claim, because they had grasped that absolute distinction between God and man which the Old Testament teaches. Where other religions held sway, it would have been quite easy, and would have caused no offence, to ascribe divinity to Jesus Christ, as divinity is understood in the myths of those religions. There one of the features that most constantly recurs is the raising of a man to the level of a god. But, if men have become accustomed to stretch out their hand and take something—in this case divinity—to themselves, they are no longer able and willing to regard it as something that they can receive from God's hand, as the gift of God alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

GOD'S WILL AS MADE MANIFEST IN LAW

The Ten Commandments are so important that it was right and natural to concentrate first on them. But actually they form only a small part of that rich collection of laws in which the righteous will of God for the ordering of His people finds expression in the Old Testament. Now at this point we touch one of those areas of the Old Testament in which even the most faithful reader of the Bible finds it difficult to feel himself at home. So before we come to the laws of conduct themselves, we must note down a few points that are necessary for an understanding of the form in which the laws have come down to us.

The various single precepts and laws have been grouped together in a number of collections—for the most part without any clear principle of organization or arrangement. The oldest of these collections is that which has commonly come to be called The Book of the Covenant, Exodus 21–23. A later collection is to be found in Deuteronomy 12–26, another in the so-called Law of Holiness in Leviticus 17–26. But we must not imagine that, because certain laws are found only in later collections, they are necessarily of later origin than the laws found in other collections. Two questions have to be kept quite distinct. One is that of the process by which various laws were brought together in the collections. The other is that of the period in which these individual laws originated.

In ancient Israel, declaration of judgment was

normally made at the gate of the city. In Ruth 4 we find a picturesque description, showing how few were the conditions that had to be fulfilled for the gathering of an assembly in which justice could be done. The plaintiff went to the gate of the city, probably the only open space that there was, called together the elders, and then proceedings could begin. There was, then, no professional class of judges; those who gave judgment were lay folk, in particular the elders among the people (see also Jeremiah 26 : 10). Here decisions were given as to all those legal questions that are likely to arise in a small community; questions of family law, loans and security, liability for injuries, laws governing slaves, laws for the protection of the poor; and, further, such matters as offences against property, and even violence and murder. Now what were the basic principles, in accordance with which decisions had to be taken? These are set forth for us in conditional form, in sentences beginning with the word "if". (There are a number of good examples in the Book of the Covenant—Exodus 22 : 1–15: "If a man steals an ox . . .", "If a thief is found . . .", etc.). But these "ifs" are not just theoretical; they refer to cases that might actually occur.

As far as such legal formulae are concerned, there is not very much difference between Israel and other peoples of the Near East. We may even suppose that the nomadic tribes of Israel, when they entered Canaan, took over a good deal of the legal tradition that they found already existing in the cities of Canaan. Now that they had adopted a settled way of living instead of the nomadic life of the desert, they were face to face with entirely different conditions and a large number of new problems; they had no developed code of law to cover all the cases that might arise. It is thus that we are able to explain the fact that Israel's ancient codes of law

have so many points in common with the traditions of law that were current throughout the whole of the East in that period.¹

This tradition of law, as we said, existed in Canaan at the time when the Israelites entered it; but it must not be supposed that Israel just took it over in a lump without examination. From this ancient body of law, based on experience and checked and refined through many centuries, Israel made its own selection; and, as we can clearly see, at many points made changes in it, in order to bring it into line with its own understanding of law and its own faith.

But the decisions given by the lay judges at the gate of the city were not decisions against which there could be no appeal. From time to time cases arose which were too difficult to be decided by the elders in the gate. For these, too, provision was made:

If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns which is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God will choose, and coming to the Levitical priests, and to the judge who is in office in those days, you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision . . . according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the verdict which they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left (Deut. 17 : 8-11).

Thus it was possible for the local judges to seek guidance and direction at the sanctuary and from the priests. For we must not imagine the priests in those days to have been entirely occupied with the duties of

¹ The best known of these other collections of laws is the so-called Code of Hamurabi, the collection of laws of the Babylonian King Hamurabi carved on a great block of stone, the discovery of which in 1901-2 caused great excitement at the time.

worship—the sacrifices and offerings of the shrine.¹ Almost more important than their service at the altar was the maintenance and the handing on of that law of God which had been entrusted to their care. They were in possession of the ancient revealed declarations of the will of God. These constituted a body of sacred knowledge of which the priests were guardians, a treasury out of which, on the high feast days of the people, they proclaimed in the Name of God the rules which were binding upon them for the ordering of their lives. Of these rules we have already spoken; they were in fact, in one form or another, the Ten Commandments.

We find similar declarations in the Book of the Covenant also. One such list of declarations is to be found in Exodus 21 : 12—17 (quoted here with some modifications in order):

Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.

Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.

Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

Whoever steals a man, whether he sells him or is found in possession of him, shall be put to death.

A third list of commandments of this kind is to be found in Deuteronomy 27 : 15—26. We shall come back to these later on (p. 56). The difference between these declarations and the formulation of the law of the village is at once clear. These are not conditional in form, or set out at length with minute attention to detail; they are declaratory in character, as concise and

¹ A later volume in this series will deal with the idea of sacrifice in the Bible.

as weighty as could be. These demands are unconditional—and this point is made even clearer in the Ten Commandments by the personal form of the address—God who is “I” speaks to man who is “Thou”. In a word, this is the law of God as immediately revealed, and in these commandments we come to the basic rock of the revelation of the will of God for us, as that was imparted to Moses.

We thus see that, in the early history of Israel, we encounter two kinds of law, and that these are markedly different from one another. It is not altogether easy to see in what sense the term “the law of God” can be applied to both these forms of law. The conditional “law of the gate”, to the practice of which Israel became accustomed only after it had entered into the land of Canaan, was based generally on the understanding of law of the oriental peoples with their manifold experiences. Yet, true as this is, the Old Testament makes no theological distinction between the declaratory law of God as proclaimed at the sanctuary and the conditional law as practised “at the gate”. The claim of each to be divine revelation is recognized. In spite of the origin of this second kind of law in the experience of nations outside Israel, Israel was prepared here also to hear the voice of its God speaking directly to His people. What other course was open to them? If all law that is an expression of justice and mercy has its origin in God, then this kind of law also must possess the authority of a direct revelation from God. So, when the books of the Law came to be compiled, the utterances of the “law of the gate” were combined with the declarations of the law of God as recorded in the tradition of the priests and of Moses. From the point of view of theology no difference was made between them; they are placed on exactly the same level.

We shall now go on to consider rather more in detail the contents of this revelation of the will of God. Once more we must recall that, over all this multitude of commands, regulations and ordinances, stands the authority of the First Commandment (see p. 29). And we must also bear in mind one other great commandment, so comprehensive and so concise that it may be taken as a summary of the many particular commands:

You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy (Lev. 19 : 2).

The reader of the Bible at first finds the number and variety of the commandments confusing. But this very variety reminds us of the principle that God's righteous will is to be brought to bear on every aspect of life. There is to be no area, either of public or of private life, over which the sovereign authority of God is not proclaimed. In relation to every aspect of man's existence and man's activity, this claim of God to sovereignty is set forth as the most urgent concern of all. The basis for all life of men in community is law. We have already mentioned that Israel had in old times its tried and tested standards of right and wrong, in the light of which judgment was pronounced "in the gate". But we find also another set of commandments, which tell us in a much more personal way that the judge must at every point be subject to the will of God:

You shall not utter a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man, to be a malicious witness. You shall not follow a multitude to do evil; nor shall you bear witness in a suit, turning aside after a multitude, so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his suit . . . You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his suit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not slay the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the

cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex. 23 : 1-9).

It is the entirely personal character of these rules that gives them their strictly binding character. There is an "I", who speaks ("*I* will not acquit the wicked"), and there is a "Thou" to whom this "I" speaks in the most direct and personal fashion. When commands are given in this form, there is no possibility of evading them. The administration of justice is here represented as something in which God is personally and very deeply interested. He speaks directly about it; He sets forth a claim, which demands obedience not in general, but in the quite definite terms of a particular situation.

In this "mirror for magistrates", one thing that strikes us with special force is the care and concern which are expressed for the poor and the stranger, that is for the lower ranks in society. This is a thread which runs through the whole of the Old Testament tradition; the commandments give expression to a concern for the poor which finds no parallel elsewhere. Let us listen to the regulations concerning loans and pledges:

If ever you take your neighbour's garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for that is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate (Ex. 22 : 26, 27).

When you make your neighbour a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you (Deut. 24 : 10, 11).

Or here is the law of interest:

If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor, and you shall not exact interest from him (Ex. 22 : 25).

Again and again these regulations come back to the subject of the poor; in every possible way they try to make his lot easier, and to protect him against extortion:

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns; you shall give him his hire on the day he earns it, before the sun goes down (for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it); lest he cry against you to the LORD, and it be sin in you (Deut. 24 : 14, 15).

To hear these commands is to recognize that they lay claim to the whole man, to man in his entirety. The evidence does not support the idea that the law of Moses is content with an outward obedience, and that Jesus was the first to transfer the problem of obedience to the world of thought and motive. We have only to think of such commandments as the following:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD (Lev. 19 : 17, 18).

We feel a deep and instinctive sympathy with these detailed laws for society; they sound almost up to date! Do we not find already expressed in them all the ideals that were the inspiration of the great social movements of the last century? Yes. But what matters is that we should recognize the vital difference between the Old Testament and the approach of much modern "Social Christianity". All these modern social movements take *man* as their starting-point; they think in terms of man's claim to happiness, or of the dignity of man, or of the infinite value of the individual soul—the same general idea can be expressed in a

great number of different ways. But in all the Old Testament there is not a word about any of these things; the one and only thing the Old Testament is concerned about is the will of God. The law must not be broken, and the poor must not be oppressed; but this is not because man is so valuable and has so many justifiable claims on life; it is because such things are contrary to God's will. And this righteous will of God is binding on man and cannot be evaded. The basic assumption on which the whole Old Testament rests is that man belongs to God, and that the first and foremost of his tasks is to serve God and obey Him.

In this connection we must say something also about the law requiring that the seventh day is to be kept holy (Ex. 20). It is remarkable that the Sabbath, in the Old Testament, is not understood as the day on which some special service of worship is held. We hear nothing of any special religious practices from which the special importance of the Sabbath day might be derived. No, the Sabbath day is the day of rest; for rest it has been appointed and for nothing else. But this is not the rest which a man might permit himself from time to time, proportioned to the work that he has accomplished. It is a cessation of work that is imposed on man from outside, by God Himself. Modern man may well find strange the idea that God can be honoured simply by doing no work. But the men of old time regarded work not as something holy in itself, but rather as something that can set up a wall of separation between even God and man. We sometimes feel that the duty to work has unchallenged sovereignty over men; but this rest that is imposed upon man from without denies the exclusive claim that work would sometimes make. The Sabbath has sometimes been called "a sacrifice of rest",

and indeed the term is not inappropriate. But the Sabbath could also be described as the *normal* day. It is the day which man does not fill to the full with his own ordinary employments, but which he gives back to God clean and unused. Thereby he returns to a truer order, the order which God appointed for the world at the time of the creation. God Himself, so we are told, rested after the creation, and by so doing He made rest itself a holy thing. "Upon the whole course of the world's history rests like a benediction God's repose of the seventh day of creation, which knows no evening" says one modern writer. But, if man no longer pays attention to this rest, his life falls victim to all manner of slavery.

Very similar ideas underlie the ordinance which lays down that the seventh year is to be observed as a year of sabbath:

When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall keep a sabbath to the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the LORD; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. (Lev. 25 : 2-4).

So the subject here is a period of hallowed rest, of lying fallow, for the soil, which is to be proclaimed at the end of every six years. Earlier we have referred to the feast of Tabernacles, which was celebrated as a festival of the renewal of the covenant of the people with God. On that occasion God caused His sovereignty over men to be proclaimed anew. But once every seven years, the festival of the renewal of the covenant was accompanied by another special usage—the proclamation of the year of Sabbath. We learn what its purpose

was from what may be regarded as one of the most fundamental of all the laws in the Old Testament:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me (Lev. 25 : 23).

God is the true owner of the land! It is He who grants it to man for his use. The purpose of the year of Sabbath is to drive this truth firmly home into the mind of the people. Man thinks that he can treat the land as his own possession; he grasps at all the mysterious powers of the fertile soil, at the treasures of the earth, and he forgets God, who gave all this to him. He regards the land as his own domain, which he can exploit in all directions exactly as he pleases. He can buy the land and sell it; he can let it for a longer or shorter period, exactly as circumstances demand. But over against man's arbitrary assertion of his claim to possession of the land, God sets up His claim to be the true owner of it.

There can be no doubt that in the early periods of Israel's history the command concerning the year of Sabbath was really obeyed and carried out. In the course of years some grow poor and fall into debt; others grow richer; and thus the true economic relationship between the people is perverted and falls into confusion. But it is not the will of God that these changes should last for ever: land and soil are not to be permanently sold. At the end of every six years, Israel must pause, and draw back the hand which he had stretched out to assert his claim to full ownership of the land. By doing so, he bears outward and visible witness to the truth that God alone and no other is the true owner of the land. At the end of the year, in a solemn religious ceremony, lots are cast anew to determine men's occupation of the land.

In the old times of the patriarchs, and at the time when Israel was mainly a nation of peasants, it was possible to put the command concerning the year of Sabbath into effect. But in ancient Israel, as sooner or later in every other nation of the world, the old peasant economy of barter and exchange gradually changes into an economy based primarily on money. The cultural life of the people comes to be concentrated in the towns. Alongside the free peasant living on his fields we meet the townsman who lives by trade. When the economic situation has so completely changed, what is to be done about keeping the commandment of the Sabbath year? How is it possible to make it in any way applicable to the towns, which have now fully passed into the stage of the money economy? We find the answer to this question in another form of the law governing the year of Sabbath, which clearly corresponds to this later situation:

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbour; . . . his brother, because the LORD's release has been proclaimed (Deut. 15 : 1, 2).

This new way of expressing the law of the Sabbath year is a good example of the way in which the laws can be modified and adapted to changed situations. A law is originally suited to one level of economic and cultural life. Then the conditions to which it was directed change. The law is not given up. It is adapted to the situation which now exists, and is proclaimed afresh in relation to these new conditions. A command given by God cannot fall to the ground. It is not tied just to one particular level of cultural development; once revealed, it has permanent and unchangeable authority

over men, however widely the conditions and manner of their life may change. And yet the law has not remained completely unchanged in its application to new circumstances. In its new form, it is not so much a proclamation of the sovereign rights of God as an admonition to brotherly love. But what gives it authority is above all else its demand, not for mere outward observance but for full inner compliance with the will of God. The One who speaks to man demands the whole heart of man, and tests the most hidden and secret impulses of his inner being.

Take heed lest there be a base thought in your heart, and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near', and your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and it be sin in you. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake (Deut. 15 : 9. 10).

In Deuteronomy we find a list of prohibitions, in which this claim of God upon the life of man, even to the most hidden nooks and crannies of his being, is most impressively set forth:

Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret. And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen'.
Cursed be he who dishonours his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'.
Cursed be he who removes his neighbour's landmark. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'.
Cursed be he who misleads a blind man on the road. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'.
Cursed be he who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'.

Cursed be he who lies with his father's wife . . .

Cursed be he who lies with any kind of beast . . .

Cursed be he who lies with his sister . . . Cursed be he who lies with his mother-in-law. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'.

Cursed be he who slays his neighbour in secret. And all the people shall say, 'Amen'.

Cursed be he who takes a bribe to slay an innocent person. And all the people shall say, 'Amen' (Deut. 27 : 15-25).

Clearly the form of these verses is liturgical. The priests set forth the commands; the people answers and assents to them. It is probable that the recital of this list of commandments was one of the high points in that ceremony of the renewal of the covenant that took place at the feast of Tabernacles. If we read the list again, we shall note that the prohibitions deal with a whole series of different subjects, but that they almost all have one thing in common. They deal with the kind of offences that a man is liable to commit in secret. An idol set up and worshipped in secret—we have already referred to this—who has any knowledge of the fact? A neighbour's boundary stone removed at night; failure to pay the respect due to parents; the meanness of leading a blind man astray—who sees all this? What tribunal is there that takes note of such offences as these? And then the whole wide field of sexual relationships! What proportion of the offences committed in this field ever comes before an earthly judge? What is so splendid is that the people of the Old Testament recognize that God has set forth commandments which apply to those areas in which man is not acting under the eyes of his fellows or in the full light of day. There are many areas of life, which the arm of earthly law and justice is too short to reach, or with which perhaps such law is incompetent to deal. But none of these

areas escapes the watchful eyes of God, and the people are called to recognize that He exercises His righteous judgment even over that which is hidden from the eyes of men. The language of the list of commands that we have quoted is made particularly stern, lest man might mistakenly imagine that in these areas of his life he is less exposed than in others to the eyes of God the righteous judge.

Let us look back once again on these laws that we have quoted and briefly explained. Two immediate impressions are likely to remain deeply stamped upon our minds.

The first is that these laws take so seriously the earth—those things that happen in the realm of time and space. Here is a will of God for the life of man upon earth, a will that permits of no evasion. God speaks directly to all the levels and all the aspects of the life of man, and here, upon this earth, He demands the obedience of man without delay and without argument.

The second point is the strength of God's will for fellowship among men. His purpose is to establish among men a fellowship based on His commandments and ordered according to His will. For the earth and the men upon it alike belong to God. The first verse of the 24th Psalm sounds rather like a comprehensive conclusion drawn from God's revelation of Himself in the laws:

The earth is the LORD's and the fulness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein.

This is the central purpose of the commandments. Their aim is to bring man back into obedience to God. To God man belongs; to His service must he be willing to dedicate himself; to Him should he be most closely linked in thanksgiving and worship. More than this;

this Old Testament people is told in the plainest terms that what this God requires of it is the deepest and purest love:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deut. 6 : 5).

Jesus Himself affirms that this is the greatest of all the commandments (Mark 12 : 29); and that there is a second like to it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19 : 18).

How did the people of the old covenant regard this revelation of the will of God? How did those, to whom it was first and particularly addressed, think of it? To this important question the answer is surprisingly clear and free from ambiguity, and it is likely to upset completely the idea that many Christians have formed of "law" in the Old Testament. For what we hear on every side is the expression of amazement and thankfulness for the marvel of this revelation of the will of God. "He has caused us to know His mighty righteousness and His judgments." This is the key-note, which sounds again and again, as men bear witness to their response to the revelation of God.

The commandments are regarded as an expression of God's gracious will; they are the absolutely reliable guarantee that God desires to have this people as His own. It is He who has given these ordinances to the people. For what purpose can He have given them, other than that the people should live in the light of His countenance? The picture of the law which we find in the Old Testament as a whole is not that it is a heavy burden to men, or that it turns life into weariness. On the contrary; Psalm 119 and Psalm 19 : 8 ff. give us some idea of the passionate thankfulness and happiness with which the people of God in the Old Testament

received the Law from the hand of God. In those two Psalms we find expressed again and again the thought that in this revelation of the will of God true life, life in the presence of God, is being offered to man. For, if God has undertaken to order a community and to develop it according to His will, surely in that community it is the true life of man that is coming to expression. Moses' speech of farewell in Deuteronomy at its close comes back to this point with concentrated emphasis:

'Be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life' (Deut. 32 : 46, 47).

"Your life". This needs a little fuller exposition. According to the testimony of the Bible, *life* is something very different from that which we generally suppose. Life is not simply a mysterious power, which is part of the being of this world; something which man possesses, which is holy in itself, and follows its own internal laws. Life is a gift that comes from the hand of God alone. Life belongs to God; and man possesses life—this is the point which may strike us as strange and unexpected—only when he is living in accordance with the will of God. Life in disobedience is in the eyes of God life which has been forfeited. Let us once more pay attention to the way in which Moses in his farewell discourse speaks of life:

'See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways . . . God will bless you . . . But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you

this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live' (Deut. 30 : 15-19).

How strange is the way in which Moses here speaks of life and death! He does not speak as though life and death were things which already "belonged" to the hearers, as though each was already theirs as part of human destiny, as though they were men who were now standing roughly half way between the beginning of life and its end. No, they are addressed as men who, through hearing the word of God, have for the first time been brought to the point where they can make a decisive choice between life and death.

This would perhaps be the right point at which to end our chapter. For this is the decisive word of the Old Testament concerning the commandments of God: that in them life is offered to men, and that they are a manifestation of the gracious will of God towards men.

The people of the old covenant were very well aware of man's incapacity and of man's refusal to live in obedience to the revelation of God's will. In the books of the prophets there is hardly a chapter in which a bitter outcry is not raised against the disobedience and the obstinacy of men. Yet to these men, who in their own day were fated to see and to proclaim God's unqualified verdict of condemnation upon men, the bright promise was given that the time was not far off when God Himself would rise up, to bridge the gulf and to heal the bitter opposition that had arisen between God and man. They foretold that God Himself would bring a new man into existence:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will

put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances (Ezek. 36 : 26, 27).

Now note that here too reference is made to the commandments. But the theme of this prophecy is that, through the miracle of a rebirth from on high, God will make the hearts of men readily obedient to the commandments, and will turn them back again to the will of God as He has revealed it. Jeremiah foretells this miracle even more clearly:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31 : 31-34).

This famous passage has often been misunderstood. There is nothing in it to suggest that, when the new covenant is given, the revelation of God given under the old covenant is no longer valid. How could God withdraw a revelation of His will which He has once given? But, under the new covenant, the relationship of men to the commandments will not be the same as it had been under the old. No longer will the commandments be proclaimed to man from without; no longer will they be imposed upon him as a will other than his own and bring him into condemnation. Then every man will bear the commandments of God in his own heart, and will find that the will of God is his own will also.

Jesus Christ, on the night on which He was betrayed,

recalled to the memory of His disciples this passage from the prophet Jeremiah, and spoke of the new covenant that was to be sealed with His blood. He it was who had completely made His own heart and will one with the will of God; it was in Him and in His perfect obedience that the new covenant, the new fellowship with God, was made available to us. As Paul says, He is the first-born among many brethren (Rom. 8 : 29).

As long as this world lasts, our new life in Christ is "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3 : 3). We still live the life of a body and of a will that have not yet been completely set free from the slavery of sin. And so the commandments of the Old Testament have still their importance for us as guardians and as guides. But they can never take from us that fellowship with God which has been given to us in Christ; they can never again become a law which brings us into condemnation.

CHAPTER FIVE

FROM PROMISE TO FULFILMENT

The stories about Moses in the Old Testament form only one part of one great book, which begins with the Book of Genesis and runs through to the end of the Book of Joshua and the occupation of the land of Canaan by Israel. This book comprises an immense mass of material running from the creation of the world up to Israel's entry into Canaan; and later it was found to be a matter of sheer practical necessity to break up the one large book into a number of main divisions. Now, if we are to understand the stories about Moses, we must be familiar with this book as a whole, with the great general structure which makes up its unity.

If we look at the contents of this book, we are likely to find them distinctly odd—from the creation of the world to the occupation of Canaan by Israel! What a magnificent opening—and what an unimpressive conclusion! So great a journey to such an insignificant end! And what an expenditure of divine guidance, miracles and judgments! On man's side what an expenditure of exaltation and humiliation, of obedience and rebellion, all to lead up to this trivial goal!

And yet here is the meaning of the whole story. It shows how God has been secretly constructing a way of blessing and salvation in a world which has separated itself from Him. The turning-point of the whole story is that at which it passes over from the general history of the human race to the story of one particular process of redemption. And here, at this point, is recorded the

word of God to Abraham, in which the whole of the future is summed up: "I will bless you, . . . and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12 : 2-3 Mg.). Here, at the very beginning of the Old Testament history of salvation something is said about its end: already we are told that God's plan of salvation will broaden out from the particular to the universal, and that in the end it will be significant for mankind as a whole far beyond the limits of Israel. It is only in this context that we can understand why Israel's entry into Canaan is so important.

We may find it strange that God should choose out one country and should concentrate His purposes within it. But the Bible deals in terms of God's will for this visible world, and His choice of the land of Canaan is an essential part of that will. The most universal and most spiritual of all the prophets of the Old Testament is the Second Isaiah; yet we must not forget that even here the whole emphasis of his prophecy falls once again upon the land. The exiled people are to return again to the promised land—here is the heart of his message (Isa. 49 : 14-21; 52 : 7-12; 54). So this return is not to be understood primarily as something that takes place in the world of thought, as something that we might call a religious renewal of mankind. The promise that is given to Israel is not in the first place a promise that they shall have a new relationship with God. And yet this changed relationship does go along with the other promise, the promise of the land. It seems that God wanted to base His claim on man, and His promise to man, on the very deepest foundation of human existence—and that is the earth on which we live. From this follow all the deep conflicts between men and the claim which God in these terms makes upon them. It follows that the work of God upon men is to

be carried out in an area in which conflict between God and man cannot possibly be avoided. When God chose this land of Canaan as His own, He chose also the place called Golgotha, which is a part of it—and this means something far more than a piece of geographical information.

This one tremendous book (Genesis to Joshua) is, if we look at its contents, constructed on the general plan Promise—Fulfilment. The time of the patriarchs is the time of promise; the occupation of Canaan under Joshua is the time of fulfilment. So the road from Egypt through the wilderness to Canaan is the road that the people must follow from promise to fulfilment; and in all the various records of the wanderings we are being shown, in typical form, things that are true also of the road that the People of God in the New Testament has to tread from promise to fulfilment. That road towards fulfilment, on which the Church of Jesus Christ upon earth is moving, casts, as it were, its shadow (Heb. 8 : 5) backwards upon that earlier road. Here are crises of distress and acts of divine deliverance that may recur again and again in our experience too, so long as it is ours to walk by faith and not by sight.

As early as the period of the prophets, the time that Israel spent in the wilderness had come to be regarded as the period in which the true relationship between God and His people had been visible in its purest and most original form. Israel in the wilderness had not yet entered into the corrupting environment of the higher civilization of Canaan. It was not in a position to run after other nations in order to insure its safety by alliances with them. In all its times of need it was thrown back upon God and upon Him alone; in that “land of drought and deep darkness . . . a land that none passes through”, it was to the guidance of God

and to nothing else that they must look. In the wilderness there was nothing that could create a barrier between the people and its Lord. They must put their trust in God alone for the supply of every need, beginning with the need for daily bread. It is for this reason that all these stories of the needs of the ancient people and of the promises made to them foreshadow almost exactly the experiences of the new people of God, the Church. Of one of these stories Paul writes, "Now these things happened to them as a warning,¹ but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10 : 11).

Let us look for a moment at the story of the manna (Exodus 16), and especially at the second part of it (from v. 16 on). It is clear that the narrator is not just telling us of a strange happening that took place in the earliest days of Israel's history. The event that is recorded belongs to one particular time and place; but at the same time it is typical, that is, it shows forth something that is true at all times and in all places.

When the manna had fallen, the people went out to gather it; and then they found that each had gathered just enough for the needs of himself and of his family. They had gone out to gather quite freely, "some more, some less", and yet, when all was in, there was neither too little nor too much. Here is expressed the consoling thought that God gives to every man his own; God will provide for him exactly that which he needs in his particular situation. But there is another important point in the story; the manna cannot be kept. Some tried to store it up, but it went bad on their hands. We cannot arbitrarily lay claim to more than that which God is pleased to give us. We must be willing to

¹ In the Greek, "typically"—as a type or foreshadowing of something that was yet to come.

receive it from His hand day by day. If we are dealing with God, the only way in which it is possible to live is "from hand to mouth".

In the interpretation of the miracle of the manna in the Book of Deuteronomy, the spiritual aspect is even more strongly stressed:

You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness . . . And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD (Deut. 8 : 2, 3).

According to this passage the manna was not food just for the body; it was given, rather, in order to show men that food for the body is not enough. Man can truly live only when God gives him the gift of His own word.

The continuity of the narrative of the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness, as we have it to-day, is sharply interrupted by the story of the spies, who were sent to spy out the land of Canaan (Num. 13, 14). This story gives us the answer to the question why the chosen people did not follow the shortest route (from south to north) in order to take possession of the promised land, and why one whole generation of grown-up people was condemned to die out in the wilderness after long wanderings hither and thither, without having seen the fulfilment of the promise. The report which the spies bring back is self-contradictory. The land is very fair (13 : 27; 14 : 7); but how can Israel take possession of it? The difficulties are too great to be overcome. Thus they were unfaithful witnesses concerning the gift that God had promised to give His people. For the moment

the people fell under the evil influence of their little faith.

Faced by the splendour of God's plan for them, they fall into a panic. Now they see clearly what they have let themselves in for, and they wish to retreat, because they are not able to put their full confidence in God. They see that the task before them is by all human standards impossible, and they completely lose heart. They go so far as to think of choosing for themselves another captain, who shall lead them back to Egypt (14 : 4). And what is involved in such proposals is nothing less than the abandonment and the betrayal of the whole series of saving acts that God has performed for them, and those that He has promised still to do for them. Only Joshua and Caleb are prepared to condemn this unbelief:

'If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the LORD . . . the LORD is with us' (Num. 14 : 8, 9).

The people is prepared to go so far as to stone these two men, who alone have honoured God by putting their trust in His word. But then God rises up to judgment (14 : 10 f.), for it is God Himself whom the people has blasphemed. Moses prays for the people; and God's answer to the prayer of Moses is most remarkable. The unbelief of this whole generation is immeasurably deep; yet even this cannot prevent the fulfilment of God's purposes of salvation. The failure of this generation cannot frustrate God's plan at some future date to reveal His salvation to the whole world:

As I live . . . all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD (Num. 14 : 21).

But this generation cannot enter into the promised land. And what now follows is strange and unexpected. The people had pretended that it was out of concern for the well-being of their children that they had decided to be disobedient to the calling of God and to return to Egypt (14 : 3); and now it is decreed that they shall die in the wilderness, but that their children shall be heirs of the promise! (14 : 31). When this announcement is made, the pride of the people is touched. What they would not trust God to give them they are now going to take by their own efforts. They will take the land in possession by their own strength. It is in vain that Moses warns them: "the LORD will not be with you".

But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD, nor Moses, departed out of the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who dwelt in that hill country came down, and defeated them and pursued them, even to Hormah (Num. 14 : 44, 45).

So for many years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. At last the time arrives when, according to the word of the Lord, they are to be allowed to go forward and to enter on their inheritance in Canaan. At this point in the narrative occurs the remarkable history of Balaam and his attempt to curse the people. In a wonderful way, this story sums up the whole of the revelation of the purpose of God given through Moses. So, as the conclusion of our study, we will look rather closely at this story and its inner meaning (Num. 22-24).

The people of Israel is now encamped "in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho". They are just at the point of entry on the fulfilment of the promise; and precisely at this moment they are

threatened by a danger more serious than any to which they have previously been exposed.

The story begins by setting forth in very strong terms the fear and terror of Balak King of Moab at the arrival of this invading army. He wishes to protect himself against folk whom he regards as barbarian disturbers of the peace. But he does not follow what would seem to us to be the obvious course; he does not take up arms against them, he does not set in motion against them any measures of outward violence; he sends messengers to Balaam the magician: "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me".

As the ancient world looked at things, a curse was very much more than an evil word. The man who curses sets in movement those daemonic powers by which the world of men is surrounded. It is possible for men thus to arouse and set in motion these dark powers from the depths, because those powers themselves are possessed by a greedy and eager desire for the work of destruction; and many men, it was believed, have an uncanny authority over these spirits and the power to command them. Such a man was Balaam, and for that reason he was widely held in repute as a magician. Balak hopes that with Balaam's help he may be able to strike the people of Israel at the very roots of its existence. But we must carefully note the word "perhaps" in v.6: "Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land". Balak regards this as no more than a possibility; when all is said and done, the success of that which he is taking in hand cannot be guaranteed. So on one side there is uncertainty; and, in contrast to it, as our narrative sets it forth, there is something quite sure and certain on the side of God.

On the arrival of Balak's messengers, so we read,

Balaam asks counsel of God, who first forbids him, and then gives him permission, to accept the invitation. But we must recognize that Balaam has himself only a dim knowledge of the living God; he turns to his idols—but in such a case as this what can they do? Although the heathen do not recognize it, it is in reality the living God who guides and rules all things, and so it is to Him that the writer immediately directs our attention. In the last resort it was with Him that Balaam had to do.

We must also note, in passing, a difficulty in the literary form in which the narrative is set before us. The story of the meeting of Balaam with the angel of the Lord cannot be exactly the continuation of that which has preceded it. It takes up again the note of warning—God's anger is kindled against Balaam (v. 22). In fact, the splendidly-told story of Balaam and the she-ass repeats for us in different form and rather more fully that strange meeting of God with Balaam of which we have had one account already in vv. 9–21. In v. 35, we are back at the same point at which we were in v. 20. Balaam is about to set out with the princes of Balak.

Now comes the central and critical point. Balaam has at last seen the angel of the Lord. He does just what any reader would expect him to do—he declares his willingness to go home. But—and this is the most surprising thing of all—that is exactly what he is not to do. Every reader must have been following the course of events with apprehension, for Balaam's purpose is a terrible one—he is setting out to curse the people. If Balaam had at this point been sent home again, the story would have been simply one more edifying tale, showing how God had once again diverted disaster from His people. But God lets the magician go on his

way. He does not bar the road before him; He does not strike him down in His wrath; He will merely direct the word that Balaam is to utter. Here our story gives expression to something that is very important in the faith of the Old Testament; God does not guide history and the destiny of men by continually opposing men in the projects that they have taken in hand. On the contrary, He lets them act. To all appearance, they are acting simply according to their own plans; and yet they cannot avoid becoming the instruments of God, and acting in reality according to His plan.

Balaam arrives in the plains of Moab, and at once sets to work. Balak leads him up to a mountain-top, and from there he can see the people encamped in the valley, but only the nearest of them—beyond that his vision cannot reach. At this point of the story the modern reader may find his main interest in the psychological problem; after his encounter with God, what is Balaam's attitude to the work on which he is engaged? But the whole interest of the story, from the point of view of the writer and of the original readers, is concentrated on what Balaam is going to say. Balaam in himself is not now so very important; he is, as it were, a figure of the twilight, and that is as it ought to be. In the sequel we shall see how this famous seer becomes no more than a tool in the hand of God. But one thing is made perfectly clear to us by the narrative—Balaam still intends to curse the people, and makes all the necessary preparations for doing so.

He has himself led up to a high place; seven altars are set up; sacrifice is offered; as is customary in such magical rites, he mysteriously changes more than once the place from which he is going to speak. The narrator quite deliberately relates in detail all these magical goings-on. All the sharper will be the

contrast between this hocus-pocus, and the words of blessing that will fall from the lips of Balaam as soon as he begins to speak. The aim of the narrator is to work out this contrast in all its details; this is the central lesson of the whole story. Balaam has ceased to be master of himself. He behaves like an automaton. The purposes of his actions and the results of those actions fall out of any relation to one another. He behaves like a caricature of a man. He is, indeed, serious enough in all that he does. But now that he has set himself against the people of God, he has no control over the effects of his words; indeed he has no control over the words themselves. Where, then, is his ancient fame as a magician?

In the light of all this, we can well imagine the strained attention with which the reader in ancient times must have awaited the first words that are to fall from Balaam's mouth. And with the very first words the great marvel is revealed. For all his magical practices, Balaam finds himself simply unable to curse:

'How can I curse whom God has not cursed?
How can I denounce whom the LORD has not de-
nounced?'
(Num. 23 : 8)

Here the story of Balaam reaches its culmination. The hidden inner side of all these strange happenings is now brought out into the open. A prophetic word lays bare that will of God which is hidden from human eyes, that will that is continuously at work in and behind those projects that men may devise for themselves. The blessing of God sets limits to the effect of the darkest and bitterest of curses.

It is a marvellous picture—of Balaam looking down on the people encamped below in total unawareness of what is going on:

‘For from the top of the mountains I see him, from the hills I behold him; lo, a people dwelling alone, and not reckoning itself among the nations!’

This is the way in which the people of the old covenant always thought of itself. In their forefather Abraham they had been called out from among the company of the peoples. They had been endowed with a special knowledge of God, and with the promise that one day they would be mediators of a salvation that would extend to all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12 : 3). Thus this people believed that it was God Himself who had set them in a position of isolation from all other peoples. The greatest of its men of God were passionately concerned to keep the treasure of Israel’s faith free from all contamination by heathen ideas. At the end of this oracle, Balaam is suddenly and strangely moved to think of his own death:

‘Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!’ (Num. 23 : 10)

Down below in the valley the people of Israel are peacefully encamped, totally unaware of the danger that threatens them. This is a picture of the way in which God’s conflict against the powers of the daemonic curse is carried on—outside the range of man’s powers and of anything that man can do. The people on earth who seem to be most intimately concerned are just doing nothing. Balak is no more than a spectator of what Balaam is doing; and Israel is calmly encamped in the valley without anxiety. The only powers engaged are those which lie above the level of the play of human forces. On one side is Balaam, who has the power to set in motion the forces of the underworld (or rather, who has himself

fallen under the power of those forces of the underworld); on the other side is God the Lord. Once again we emphasize that this is exactly what the narrator wants to make plain; the decision in this conflict is not in the hands of men, it belongs to a higher dimension than the human. In earlier times, men would have said quite plainly that this is a conflict between God and the devil.

In the succeeding oracles of blessing, the vision of the seer stretches out to ever-wider horizons. God cannot lie! A word spoken by Him can never fall to the ground (Num. 23 : 19). It is only on the basis of this simple conviction that we can explain how the expectation of a future salvation and judgment grew in Israel to so mighty a stream. In every period prophets arose in Israel and foretold the future; and that which remained unfulfilled in the present must be maintained through all the generations as expectation, until it shall please God to glorify Himself in the fulfilment. No promise of God can remain for ever unfulfilled.

There is some reason to think that there existed in Israel a kind of Advent festival, a solemn ceremony in which the coming of God and of His Kingdom were celebrated in a great act of worship. The people of the old covenant saw that in the world there is still much which resists the sovereignty of God. For that reason it lived always in a state of eager expectation of the time of the decisive triumph of God, of the time when God will be accepted as King throughout all the earth. The climax of this festival was probably a great shout of triumph at the thought of this manifestation of the sovereignty of God that is so soon to come. It is something like this rousing cry of triumph that now suddenly strikes upon the ear of the alien magician, which God

has opened to hear His word. And now he understands the truth: If a people waits in such readiness for the coming of the Kingdom of God, against that people no magic or sorcery can prevail (Num. 23 : 21).

Balak is furious at all this; but his fury cannot check the stream of blessing that flows from Balaam's mouth. In his third oracle, Balaam pours forth a tremendous song in praise of the promised land:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel!

Like valleys that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the LORD has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters (Num. 24 : 5, 6).

This is the land that God has chosen, in order that He may lay there the foundation of His coming Kingdom.

Now at last Balak's patience is at an end. He is minded to drive Balaam away. Balaam breaks off his stream of prophecy. But, just as he is about to take his departure, all unbidden he falls again into prophetic utterance. His spirit presses forward to the furthest goal of the history of salvation as it is revealed in the Old Testament. At this point the spirit of the seer is reaching out and touching what really is the end of all things. This is made plain by the circumstantial and specially solemn introduction to his speech:

And he took up his discourse, and said, 'The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is closed, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, but having his eyes uncovered' (24 : 15, 16. See R.S.V. margin).

It looks as though the seer was afraid to give up this last secret, or at least to make it too easily available to the understanding of the hearers. For this reason he

makes them share with him the laborious concentration, the suppression, the elimination, of all individual mental life, that are needed if a man is to be the vehicle of such an ultimate divine revelation. The eyes of his body are closed; only so can he receive the revelation of the Almighty. "Falling down"—he can receive it only in the attitude of the most complete humility before God. And then he lets us see how, when a man has thus renounced himself in meditation, the outlines of the distant vision gradually begin to become plain. Not all at once but gradually the principal features of that most distant and most mysterious revelation begin to be discerned:

'I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh: a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel' (Num. 24 : 17).

The Messiah! Here Balaam touches on that expectation of a ruler, sent by God to deliver, of which we find so many evidences in the Old Testament. But the prophets do not all depict the figure of this messianic king in the same way. In Isaiah we find the picture of a Messiah who establishes the righteousness of God upon earth and is a helper of the poor (Isa. 11 : 1-5). In Genesis 49 : 10 ff., we find one

Binding his foal to the vine and his ass's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes; his eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.

Are we back in the garden of Eden? Is this the restoration of the original blessing pronounced by God upon man?

As Christians we are bound to say that in each one of these pictures there is something of Christ; but each of them is linked to the ideas of a particular time, and these ideas are not in themselves of permanent significance.

Balaam says of Messiah that "he shall crush the forehead of Moab". This makes it clear that the full picture of the Christ as we know Him in the New Testament has not dawned on his vision. Moab and Balak—these are for him types of the powers that are hostile to God, and set themselves in array against that realm that God has chosen for His own and has taken under His own protection. And these are the hostile powers—so the oracle of Balaam foretells—that the Anointed of the Lord shall vanquish in the end.

From this climax the story falls steeply away to its conclusion. Balak gives up his attempt to injure Israel, and Balaam goes back to his own home (Num. 24 : 25).

This whole story of Balaam is not a tale told without a purpose. In the form in which we now have it, it is the expression of certain quite definite beliefs, of the central doctrines of the Old Testament revelation. God stands by His own to help them. It is not upon men nor upon human power politics that they depend for their protection. Furthermore, even the most sinister purposes of the enemy against the people of God are bound to be transformed in such a way as to benefit them; Balaam comes to curse—but he stays to bless. Thus the story makes visibly plain to us something that otherwise we should be able to grasp only by a daring and adventurous faith. All history has a secret inner side, which is hidden from the eyes of the natural man. The story of Balaam turns history inside out and makes the miracle plain. Balaam comes desiring to curse; and, as we may say, in the very teeth of his desires the curse is turned into a blessing.

Now, if we call this "a tale", we must not use the term in the sense of a story of wish-fulfilment, dictated by nothing but the human imagination; it corresponds to a reality that the people of the old covenant

had experienced and tested in a long history of fellowship with their God. The Christian Church, looking back on its own history, must confess that it too has often been heir to the blessing of Balaam. This story, too, sets forth in visible form the truth of the New Testament saying that "in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8 : 28).

In the last book of the Bible we read of those who sing "the song of Moses and of the Lamb" (Rev. 15 : 3). It began in Moses; it is fulfilled in Christ. We have tried to set out briefly the main lines of the revelation of God as it came to Moses. What are these lines? There is, first, the calling of a people chosen by God to live directly under His guidance and in obedience to His will. This is a calling to pilgrimage, to movement in the direction of a promised land. There is the revelation of a God who dwells in the midst of His people in mercy and in judgment. There is the communication of a law of God, which is given as a guardian and a guide, and which is to be accepted and observed with joy. There is the vision of an expanding purpose to be fulfilled at the end of the ages, when all nations will be brought into the Kingdom of God.

If the reader of this book has some acquaintance with the New Testament, he will have no difficulty in recognizing that all these principles of the Old Testament revelation are still in full force, though in modified forms, in the New. What was dimly shown in Moses has been shown to us very much more clearly in Jesus Christ. And, just because we have so much fuller light, the responsibility that rests on us is heavier than that which rested on the people of God in the Old Testament.

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